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Existential Angst in Dobby and Kreacher, the House-elves in the 'Harry Potter' Series

Abstract : It was a long held belief that essence precedes existence which meant that everyone could blame their nature for each and every one of their actions. But with the arrival of the existentialist movement in the nineteenth and twentieth century, the focus shifted from essence to existence. This resulted in a new kind of claim, existence precedes essence. One of the best examples highlighting this claim can be found in J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter series. Its three major characters prove the mettle of this claim with their actions. But this does not mean that they are the only examples which support this claim in the series. Many other minor characters fulfil this claim as well. The most interesting among them are Dobby and Kreacher who are representatives of the class of House-elves. Though they are minor characters and cannot be classified as humans but this does not mean that they do not experience any sort of existential angst compared to the human characters. Dobby and Kreacher, too, are individuals whose decisions and choices decide their essence and not the other way around.

Keywords - existence precedes essence, existentialism, Harry Potter

Introduction

It is a well-known fact that Rowling gave life to the most iconic characters in her fictional world of Harry Potter series. While Harry is the quintessential hero of the series, Lord Voldemort is the perfect villain. Above all, Rowling gave to her readers the most memorable character in the form of Albus Dumbledore. The common thing among all these characters is that each of them is an independent individual who highlight their existential angsts through their actions and decisions. On the one hand, Harry and Lord Voldemort are connected to each other through a prophecy which links them and states that ‘EITHER MUST DIE AT THE HAND OF THE OTHER FOR NEITHER CAN LIVE WHILE THE OTHER SURVIVES’ (Order of Phoenix 841). On the other hand, the decision to actually fulfil this prophecy is taken by both the characters individually. There are many instances in the series which show that Harry as well as Lord Voldemort could have overcome the prophecy if only they had ignored the said prophecy. In a way, Harry had more power in his hands as he knew this part of the prophecy while Lord Voldemort was unaware of it till the end. Harry could have chosen to run away or even join Lord Voldemort but it was his decision to choose the prophecy and fulfil it. Similarly, it was Lord Voldemort’s decision to kill Harry with his own hands which always presented Harry with a window of opportunity to escape. As a result, Harry was able to evade Lord Voldemort on all the occasions even after walking towards his death in the Forbidden forest. It was Lord Voldemort’s decision to make Horcruxes by committing the gravest of sins and using it to do the worst kind of magic. Likewise, Dumbledore chose to work his entire life in order not to repeat the mistakes of his youth. He is the best example of the existential catchphrase existence precedes essence. Dumbledore believed that power did not suit him as he was bound to be blinded by power and so he decided to never ever accept any powerful position in his life. He was satisfied in being the

Headmaster of Hogwarts and guiding its students as it was his decision and was not dictated by anyone else. His decisions show that he invested completely in the premise that his existence precedes his essence. This reflects the fact that one of the underlying themes which are addressed by Rowling in her series, time and again, is existentialism and its idiom existence precedes essence. This aspect is highlighted not only by these three major characters but also by other minor characters as well. One class of such characters, in the series, is known by the name House-elves. Amongst the various characters representing this class, two are of prime importance for their contribution to the action of the plot in the series. The two characters being referred to here are Dobby and Kreacher.

Dobby is the name of the House-elf serving the Malfoy household while Kreacher is the House-elf of the Black family. According to the series, the essence of House-elves dictates service to its human masters and their family. They are 'bound to serve one house and one family forever' and can attain freedom from this only when they are 'set free' by their masters (Chamber of Secrets 14). House-elves have to serve the family till the time they die and the biggest symbol of their enslavement is their ragged clothes. In the case of Dobby, his enslavement was represented by his clothes which were nothing more than a pillowcase. On being questioned by Harry as to why Dobby wears only the filthy pillowcase, Dobby answers:

"This, sir?" said Dobby, plucking at the pillowcase. "'Tis a mark of the house-elf's enslavement, sir. Dobby can only be freed if his masters present him with clothes, sir. The family is careful not to pass Dobby even a sock, sir, for then he would be free to leave their house forever." (Chamber of Secrets 177)

Towards the end of the book, Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets, Harry is finally able to grant Dobby his freedom by tricking Lucius Malfoy into giving Dobby a sock. This is

where the true transformation of Dobby as an existentialist being is completed in a way. Before being granted freedom, Dobby always tried to help Harry against the wishes and plans of his master which was his first step towards existentialism, specifically the idiom existence precedes essence. Dobby was bound by his own laws which forced him not to disobey his master but the House-elf found loopholes to assist Harry. In his attempt to safeguard and protect Harry, Dobby almost ended up killing Harry by the rogue Bludger. Dobby's decisions and actions highlight his existential angst as well as his fight for what rightfully belongs to him. In many ways, the House-elves were more powerful than their wizard masters as can be deduced from the fact that Lucius Malfoy leaves once his former servant threateningly advises him that he 'shall not harm Harry Potter' and should leave (Chamber of Secrets 338). Even though, Dobby's essence dictated that he was bound to be enslaved for life to one family and would have to bear all types of mistreatment and punishment for his mistakes, yet he chose to help Harry every time. As he was ordered by his master not to disclose his plans to anyone, Dobby could never tell Harry what exactly was being planned and by whom. The only thing that the elf could do was warn Harry of the coming danger and try and keep him away and safe. In order to do this, Dobby ruins the Dursley's party, closes the entry of the platform 9 $\frac{3}{4}$ which forces Harry and Ron to use Mr. Weasley's enchanted car and leads to them being hurt by the Whomping Willow and in the process hurting the tree. The elf then enchants one of the Bludgers during one of Harry's Quidditch matches and ends up breaking Harry's arm. But once Dobby attains freedom from his forced enslavement, he begins to live his life on his own terms while being thankful to Harry for everything.

According to the rules of enslavement of House-elves, these non-humans were not supposed to be paid for their services and were not allowed to have fun, 'House-elf does what they is told' (Goblet of Fire 99). In Hagrid's opinion, "It's in their nature ter look after humans, that's what they like, see? Yeh'd be makin' 'em unhappy ter take away their work,

an' insultin' 'em if yeh tried ter pay 'em" (Goblet of Fire 265). However, after attaining freedom Dobby decided not to be enslaved by any other family. Instead he chose to seek a paying job which took him to Hogwarts where he joined the Hogwarts House-elves on his own terms and conditions. Even though, Dumbledore had offered Dobby 'ten Galleons a week, and weekends off', the House-elf chose to work only for 'a Galleon a week and one day off a month' (Goblet of Fire 379). He even took Winky, another freed House-elf, who was ashamed of being discarded by her master, to work with him at Hogwarts. Dobby then began to motivate the other House-elves to ask for their freedom but to no avail. When Hermione began her plan to free the Hogwarts House-elves by leaving clothes around the Gryffindor common room, the other elves considered it an insult and refused to clean the room. It was then that Dobby took it upon himself to clean the common room all by himself and as a result collect all the pieces of clothing left by Hermione. He then chose to wear all of it himself as he had found them and they reflected his freedom. In *Harry Potter and the Order of Phoenix*, Dobby once again chooses to help Harry out on his own accord by assisting him in finding the Room of Requirements for the D.A. meetings. Later on, when Professor Umbridge ultimately finds out about the secret meeting place and orders the Hogwarts House-elves not to inform anyone, Dobby still manages to inform Harry. His decision to warn Harry which is in direct opposition to his so called House-elf essence shows how he still holds high the existential idiom. But the biggest example of Dobby's freedom and independent existence can be found from his actions in the Malfoy manor in *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*.

When Harry and Hermione reconcile with Ron, in *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, and are listening to the radio broadcast by familiar voices, Harry in his excitement takes the Dark lord's name unbeknown to him that the name 'Voldemort' is jinxed. As a result, the three friends are caught by a group of snatchers led by Greyback. They are then

taken to the Malfoy manor where Hermione is tortured while Harry and Ron are put into a cellar which according to Luna was ‘escape-proof’ (Deathly Hallows 466). Harry asks for help from the broken piece of a two-way mirror in his possession and receives the assistance of Dobby almost immediately. While Ron and Luna could not disapparate from the cellar, Dobby was able to apparate and disapparate from it. On Harry’s request, Dobby transported the other inmates to a safe place and then later came back to save Harry and his friends. All through their conversation it was quite apparent that Dobby was acting on his own will and was not forced to help out Harry or the others in any way. It was his decision and choice to assist Harry. Furthermore, Dobby saves Harry and his friends by dropping the chandelier at the most opportune time and when his old mistress Narcissa Malfoy questions him for this actions he simply answers “you must not hurt Harry Potter” (Deathly Hallows 474). He even forces the wand out of his old mistress’s hand on which Bellatrix flies into a rage while addressing Dobby as a slave. On hearing this Dobby simply answers:

“Dobby has no master!” squealed the elf. “Dobby is a free elf, and Dobby has come to save Harry Potter and his friends!” (Deathly Hallows 474)

Once again showing that he is a free individual who does not need to serve others for it does not define his essence. It is Dobby’s actions and choices which decide his essence. It is due to these reasons that when Dobby dies due to the knife of Bellatrix, Harry decides to give him a proper burial of the Muggle kind. Instead of using magic to give Dobby a resting place, Harry digs a grave for the House-elf with his own hands and lays his little friend to rest. Rowling describes Harry’s actions as: ‘He dug with a kind of fury, relishing the manual work, glorying in the non-magic of it, for every drop of his sweat and every blister felt like a gift to the elf who had saved their lives’ (Deathly Hallows 478). This proves the existential claim of ‘existence precedes essence’. Dobby, the loyal servant, would not have received such a gift

from his master, upon his death but Dobby, the free House-elf received the highest honour due to his actions which saved the life of his friend Harry and many others.

The other House-elf which needs to be mentioned here with Dobby is Kreacher, the House-elf serving the Black family. Kreacher is the perfect example of someone who is tied down by the hegemonic ideology of others. As a humble and loyal servant of the Black family, Kreacher came to hate everything and everyone which was hated by his master and mistress. As a result, even when he was forced to serve Sirius who was the last heir of the Black family, he performed his duties begrudgingly. Even though none of the Half-bloods or Muggle-borns hurt Kreacher in any way yet he hated them based on the mere fact that his mistress hated their likes. According to the laws of their kind, Kreacher was to serve only the Black household and be loyal to them. However, the House-elf like Dobby found a loophole to the laws and helped the Malfoy's and Bellatrix Lestrange in tricking Harry and Sirius. In the end, all this led to Sirius's death, for which Harry held Kreacher to be responsible. When seen in this light, it was Kreacher's choice to betray Sirius even when it was against his so called House-elf essence. But the biggest example of choice and decision which was taken by Kreacher and highlights the existence precedes essence claim in him, is found in his decision to fight in the Battle of Hogwarts. Rowling describes the scene as follows:

The house-elves of Hogwarts swarmed into the entrance hall, screaming and waving carving knives and cleavers, and at their head, the locket of Regulus Black bouncing on his chest, was Kreacher, his bullfrog's voice audible even above this din: "Fight! Fight! Fight for my Master, defender of house-elves! Fight the Dark Lord, in the name of brave Regulus! Fight!" (Deathly Hallows 734)

The Hogwarts House-elves could never agree with Dobby when he was standing up against the wizard master's for the rights of House-elves. But, in the end, they joined forces against

the Dark Lord and were fighting against their very masters. Kreacher was inspired to do so after realizing the sacrifice of his former master, Regulus Black and the ideology of his new master, Harry Potter. Kreacher was so happy with Harry that he willingly began to cater to Hermione, a muggle-born without cursing her in the name of his old mistress. All the decisions taken by Kreacher were his own which defined his essence rather than the fact that he was a House-elf meant for the service of his master alone. Sirius was unable to understand this subtle difference while Harry could gather it and thus, allowed Kreacher to make decisions for himself rather than force any kind of ideology on him.

Conclusion

It can be very easily gathered from the above examples that both Dobby and Kreacher fought the age old belief in the ideology that essence precedes existence and held high the claim that it is always the existence which precedes essence. As in the end, Dobby died the death of a hero and found a great friend in Harry Potter rather than die as a mere House-elf. Similarly, Kreacher went from a hate-filled servant to a loving and caring House-elf. No-doubt there was always a nudge involved which helped them to decide for themselves, but ultimately the decision was theirs and theirs alone which highlights that they had to exist before they could decide their essence.

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